

BUSINESS STRATEGIES IN ENGLISH BUSINESS LETTERS: A COMPARATIVE STUDY BETWEEN NATIVE AND NON-NATIVE SPEAKERS OF ENGLISH

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ABSTRACT

Politeness strategies are of perennial importance to keep the face of the receiver. In this context, people may try to avoid using 'Face- Threatening act (FTA) towards others, which in turn make them feel annoyed. FTAs are speech acts that are infringed on the wants of the receiver. The main reason behind developing politeness strategies is to minimize the impact of FTAs; hence called 'face-mitigating acts' (FMA's). The aim of this study is to test the use of politeness strategies in English Business letters, ascertaining the existence of these strategies in two English Business Letters excerpts used by American Native and Iraqi Non- Native Speakers of English. Politeness Strategies have been successfully used to test the existence of these devices in business communities, at the same time, no further applications are known in this regards to the date. This article examines the testing procedures for politeness strategies experiment and presents the results. The results show that politeness strategies are well- formed in English Business Letters. Further, the use of more polite style in writing business letters by Iraqi Non-Native Speakers of English results in more formal style of writing as compared to those written by American Native Speakers who use less formal style of writing. On the basis of the conclusions identified, the current study proposes some pedagogical recommendations and suggestions for further research.

KEYWORDS: Business Letters, Politeness Strategies, Native Speakers, Non-Native Speakers & Speech Act

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INTRODUCTION

With the fast development of world economy, business communication is becoming more increasingly important, (Peter, 2004: 293). Business letters are considered as major form of communication in the commercial world, play active role in the administration and business performance (Hildebrandt *et al.*, 1982: 8-11). Newman and Scott (2017: 4) explain that the sender of business letters must always remember the concerned goal of writing these letters. He/she should also remember the receiver needs expectations and write in a more polite and tactful way. Moreover, a letter involves a message from one party (sender) to (receiver) containing information to keep ties of communication between two parties (Peter, 2004: 293) and these approaches the aims of this study which deal with business letters. Business letters involve different politeness strategies according to their genre and individual speech acts.

Business letters are of great importance nowadays due to fast- expanding domains of information revolution. Business letters aim at convincing the receiver to do something that has not been taken into

consideration or something that might be inconvenient. There are five types of English Business Letters: Information, Request, Promotion, Cover, and Response Letters. These business letters are formulated to produce some effect by action, in which negative politeness is important. Brown and Levinson (1987) point out that business letters are FTAs to the potential reader's negative face. Simultaneously, the sender of a business letter risks of his/her positive face, because the persuasive message he/she would like to convey may be disliked to turn down by the receiver. Based on Brown and Levinson (1987) and Watts (2003) Face theory. This article explores how politeness strategies and relative power of politeness devices are used in business letters. In addition, these said theories have been adopted to account for the use of politeness strategies in English business letters. Request Letters (Native and Non-Native) are going to be analysed to show the importance of politeness strategies in writing English Business Letters.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Literature Review

Throughout the emergence of politeness and Face theory in 1980s, dramatic achievements have been made in various domains such as business community, text systems, and mass media including political and economic periods (Hudson, 1996: 112). In these domains many scholars focus on how politeness devices and Face Theories are applied to different business discourses, and most of the researchers are mainly stressed on the pragmatic use of these theories (Eckersley & Kaufmann, 1970: 14-27; Yule, 1998: 6; Mey, 2001 :6; Brown & Levinson, 1987: 69). Leech (2014: 14) states that number of studies on English business letters are mainly interested in the study lexico-grammatical features of all types of business letters.

Business letters context encompasses both aspects i. e. Pragma linguistic and Socio pragmatic. The three variables (social distance, Power, and the absolute ranking of the threat of FTA) that determine the weight of speech act in terms of Face- Threat which is available in the context of business correspondence (Brown & Levinson, 1978: 74). For Mey (2005: 289) says that, this indicates the presence of socio-pragmatic aspects of politeness. In other words, speech act cannot be determined whether it is an FTA or not unless taking into account any / or all variables mentioned. For example, a complaint letter incorporates rough tone of language due to its nature. Thus, some rude expressions can be regarded as unmarked, predicted, conventional, and hence non-impolite (Habermas, 1998: 222).

Brown and Levinson's Politeness Principle

Brown and Levinson (1987) make major contribution to the study of politeness. One of the most significant aspects of their theory is the concept of *face*. Brown and Levinson (1978, 1987) manipulate 'face' to refer to the fundamental and universal individual desires as they apply to social interchanges. They (ibid.61) claim that "our notion of 'face' is derived from that of Goffman and the English folk term, which ties face up with notions of being embarrassed or humiliated, or losing face". Face encompasses two particular kinds of aspects: the desire not to be imposed on and to have freedom of action (negative face), and the desire to be accepted, liked, and understood by others (positive face) (Brown & Levinson, 1987: 13). A person in each community has both negative and positive faces, they are aware of their linguistic choices of language. Negative face is the basic claim to territories, personal preserves, rights to non-distraction—i. e. to freedom of action and freedom from imposition. **Positive face** is the positive consistent self-image or "personality" (crucially including the desire that, this self-image be appreciated and approved of).

Brown and Levinson (1987: 61) believe that both the sender and receiver have the interest to preserve one each others' face, but they often have to commit FTAs. These FTAs can also threaten the public self-image or face of Hearer (the receiver) by the engagement of the speaker's face (sender) and the hearer (receiver) own needs in the interaction.

There are four main strategies the receiver could use when he/she decides to make a FTA; these devices are usually classified from most polite to least polite.

Bald on record (without redress) perform the act baldly without mitigation devices, (Brown and Levinson, 1987: 69); 1. Positive politeness (with redress) aims to do the FTA with a redressive action that attends to H's (hearer) positive face, which indicates expressing solidarity (Brown and Levinson, 1987: 101); 3. Negative politeness (with redress) aims to perform the FTA explicitly by using mitigation devices (Brown & Levinson, 1987: 129); 4. Off-record politeness: speaking indirectly so that if challenged, he can deny it (Brown & Levinson, 1987: 211).

Watts' Descriptive Politeness

Watts' (2003: 19) believes that politeness theory needs to be a descriptive theory of P1, and be able to offer a way of assessing how members themselves may have evaluated that behaviour. He disagrees with the theories of Eelen (2001) who considers second –Order Politeness (P2) is the theory of politeness, and Leech (2014) who defines first- Order Politeness (P1) as being descriptive manifesting its inability to compose P2 theory.

The basic framework of Watts' theory (2003: 21) is the distinction between Politic and- Polite behaviour. Politic behaviour is "behaviour, linguistic and non-linguistic, which the participants construct as being appropriate to the ongoing social interaction". On the other hand, polite behaviour is "behaviour beyond what is perceived to be appropriate to the ongoing social interaction", (Watt, 2003: 21). In Politic Behaviour, for example, the sender of business letters may try to direct, marked, Unconventional, predicted, appropriate salient linguistic behaviour (im) politeness (Thank you/do not do it again). This behaviour is used to locate possible realizations of polite or impolite behaviour and assessing the way in which, members of a community have evaluated that behaviour (Eelen, 2001). On the other hand, the sender of business letters may use indirect, unmarked, conventional, unpredicted, and inappropriate social expressions of politic behaviour. It is formulated to save the hearer's (receiver) face (FSA) when FTA damages the face of the hearer (receiver), (Watts, 2003: 19).

In addition, polite behaviour is the appropriate perception in an ongoing social interaction. There are three main socio- pragmatic factors: power, social distance, absolute ranking plays active role in the determination the type of politeness strategy employed in business letters.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

English Business Letters

Vergaro (2004: 183) defines business letters as an important part of business communication. Business Letters are "formal article communication between, to or from business and usually sent through the post office or sometimes by courier" (Durikova, 2006: 3). Taylor (2005, cited in moreno, 2010: 117) says that, business letters are often the main means of establishing business relations with other organizations. In this context, Galko (2001, cited in Bellaouar, 2013: 19) states that business letters are usually used between people who work in different companies, but they can sometimes used within the same company in order to communicate between its divisions.

Business Letters are one of the most effective ways of business communication. According to Stankov (2013: 13), this type of communication can be used inside a company between employees and their employer or outside the company with “purchasers, suppliers or potential investors”. Ashley (2003: 5) points out that, when writing a business letter, the writer has to consider who will be reading this letter, what does the reader already know about the company, or what does the reader need to know. Pastor and Calderón (2010: 41) argues that business letters are powerful ways to deliver formal or persuasive information, establish permanent records, or send significant, sensitive, or confidential messages. Although e-mail has become the most popular way to exchange written messages, business letters are still a necessary communication tool (Khalid, 2013: 20).

Politeness Strategies of Effective Business Letters

According to Kostelnick and Roberts (1998:17), “clarity strategies help the receiver (audience) to decode the message, to understand it quickly and completely, and when necessary, to react without ambivalence”. Conciseness represents the avoidance of all unnecessary words and expressions which are irrelevant to the communication subject, (Aqil, 2009: 17). Completeness means a writer needs to make sure that his letter provides the reader with the needed information (Weinberg, 2002: 7). Consideration refers to giving importance to the other person, whether he/she is a reader audience, spectator or listener (Aqil, 2009: 19). Business messages should always demonstrate the writer’s attendance to the costumer’s interest, goods and wants, that is, it is a strategy which typically indicates that the writer manifests a sort of care and interest towards the reader’s desires (Brown & Levinson, 1987: 103). Business Courtesy is vitally important for creating a “harmonious work environment and for representing your company in the best manner possible” (Fox, 2008: 9). In business, “we must create friendliness with all those to whom we write. Friendliness is inseparable from courtesy” (Bisen, 2009:19). *Concreteness* adds conviction to the message. It is easy for the reader to believe on concrete messages. Concreteness also increases credibility of the sender of message (Aqil, 2009: 17). *Correctness* helps to produce a correct business letter, in other words, to avoid errors by reviewing and revising. Weinberg (2002: 72) points out that, correctness in business communication ultimately implies there is no grammatical, punctuation, spelling or other language errors in communication.

CASE STUDY AND DISCUSSIONS

Model of Analysis

The model adopted in this article includes Brown and Levinson's theory (1987), which is considered as the fundamental framework. In addition, Watt's politeness behaviour descriptive theory (2003) has also been adopted.

A case Study of Politeness in Request Letters written by Iraqi Non-Native Speaker of English

This text is taken from a request letter written by the Federation of Iraqi Chambers of Commerce to U. S. Agency for International Development.

Text1

Dear Sir,

The Federation of Iraqi Chambers of Commerce presents its compliments and would like to introduce our self to you.

The Federation would be very grateful to accept any technical assistance provided to improve the entrepreneurs in these fields and capacity building of the employees in our establishments, and participating in the activities which might be held by your project to promote trade.

The Federation takes this opportunity to thank you in advance for your cooperation, and hopes that our request will be taken into consideration.

Jaafar Al Hamadani
President of FICC

Analysis

The salutation in this Request business letter written by Iraqi Non-Native Speaker of English is represented by the phrase 'dear sir', which is used as an opening formula in this utterance. This technique realizes one aspect of the politeness positive strategy 'use appropriate forms of address', which is the use of 'forms of address', with which the writer performs an honorific form towards the addressee as a means of showing respect. The employment of this pattern indicates a conventional politeness marker as it represents a behaviour, which is expected and predicted in this context. It is a 'politic behaviour' that if it were left out, it would be missed, and its absence would be charged up to discourtesy.

The first line of the letter starts as usual with introducing a compliment. It is a performative and expressive speech act denoting clearly a positive politeness marker, which designates a sort of goodwill and solidarity between the sender and the receiver. Such a speech act is primarily aimed at maintaining, enhancing, or supporting the receiver's face. The ultimate function of the compliment in this letter is to soften the following request and make it less direct and coercive. Therefore, the technique used in this expression realizes not only the positive politeness strategy 'give gifts to H', but also the negative politeness strategy 'minimize the imposition' in attenuating the coercion of the request uttered afterwards. However, this utterance is still ostensibly seen as a conventional and predicted expression which the receiver expects to read in the introductory of a letter. In this regard, it is regarded as a politic behaviour, as its omission results in FTA.

In the same utterance, the sender uses the pattern *would like*, where, the epistemic 'would' pragmatically express tentativeness or politeness rather than a hypothesis. This device is characterized as a negative politeness marker, since it denotes the sender's request for permission from receiver to present a reaction. The modal *would* of volition followed by *like to* can express a pattern identified as a conveyor of the sender's humility. That is, with this device, the sender not only utters his preference tactfully, but also manifests his respect towards the receiver formally. Thus, the pattern 'would like to' can be seen as a negative politeness marker demonstrating the sender's implication in the avoidance of direct imposition on the receiver. With the pattern 'would like to' the sender's can politely manifest his expectation towards the receiver's performance of the act presented. It is apparent that *would like to introduce...* is indirect and looks more polite than *The Federation introduces...* Therefore, the sender's courtesy in this utterance can be paraphrased as something like *if you let us, we would suggest that* or *we would like you to agree with us in our suggestion that...* As such, the technique used in this pattern realizes the negative politeness strategy 'minimize imposition'. This pattern represents a polite behaviour, because it goes beyond politic behaviours.

The second paragraph, again starts with the epistemic ‘would’, but in this time, this epistemic modal verb conveys a sense of hypothesis in *The Federation would be very grateful*. There is a conditional characteristic in the expression, and therefore ‘would’ is used in the conditional clause, where the ‘if’ clause is implied and not stated explicitly which is paraphrased as something like *The Federation would be very grateful if you provide any technical assistance...* In this regard, the sender’s use of this pattern is mainly related to his art of hedging through indirectness. With the existence of hypothetical *would*, the text above turns the sense of assertion into expectation which can make the receiver free from any obligation to perform the action expected. In this case, the modality marker is employed to express hedging, which is an aspect of negative politeness strategies.

In the same utterance, the sender uses the epistemic device in *would be very grateful* to show a sort of ‘making commitment’ of expressing ‘gratitude’ in case, the recipient performs the required action. Moreover, the commitment expressed by the sender is also intensified by the adverb ‘very’, which is used to further enhance the recipient’s face. This commitment reflects the employment of the positive politeness strategy ‘promise’, with which the sender goes beyond the politic behaviour, hence, polite behaviour.

The last paragraph, the sender ends the letter with an expressive speech act in the pattern of ‘thanks in advance’. This pattern is used here to express gratitude attempting to support the recipient’s positive face by building solidarity and suggesting common ground with the recipient. However, this pattern can result in a serious drawback as it may short-change the interaction by assuming that the recipient will do something even before he has agreed, which in turn results in a serious FTA. The other problem with this pattern is that it implies that the sender’s obligation to say ‘thank you’ is done and the sender does not need to express gratitude after the recipient actually does what the sender has asked him to do. The sender, again, shortcuts the interaction and makes the recipient feel left out. Consequently, the sender’s does not observe this communicative failure, and inadvertently threatens the receiver’s negative face by looking so coercive towards him. The following statement and *hopes that our request will be taken in consideration* seems much better than the preceding one, that it makes the recipient free from any obligation to do the action by making the request softener with the use of the linguistic devices ‘hope’ and ‘take into consideration’, whose function is to show that the determination of doing the action is allocated to the recipient exclusively.

In addition, the request, incorporating the verb ‘hope’, demonstrates the employment of the negative politeness strategy ‘give deference’ by giving the recipient the power and superiority by making the request less direct. The fact that the sender wants to show a sort of humility seems primarily to attenuate the obligation on the receiver, as the absence of this pattern would make the request more threatening. In this regard, this utterance is seen as politic.

A Case Study of Politeness in Request Letter written by American Native Speaker of English

The current text represents a business letter sent from the US Embassy to FICC, specifically to the Public Relation Manager, where this letter is a request. As it is, a letter sent to FICC after receiving a prior hand-filled up questionnaire forms of delegates, the sender sends the current letter to guide FICC’s delegates to the right way to fill up these forms.

Text1

Dear Saif,

Kindly let the delegates fill up the questionnaire form on line not by hand as received. For each company, I also need a letter head from the company, authorizing travellers to attend The World of Concrete 2017, please mention the name and position in the company.

Thank you
Looking forward to seeing you in Las Vegas

Best regards

Bill Rob
Commercial Assistant

Analysis

In the first line of this Request letter written by American Native Speakers of English, the sender starts with the adverb 'kindly' as a hedging device, which is one of the means by which linguistic politeness is demonstrated. That is, the sender uses such a linguistic marker to soften the propositional content of the following imperative utterance, hence *let the delegates fill up the questionnaire...* This hedging is used to imply that the sender is not totally committed to, or responsible for, the certainty of the action uttered. Therefore, since such a linguistic marker is used to attenuate the imposition of the following request, then it can be regarded as a realization of the negative politeness strategy 'hedge'. However, owing to the fact that this minimal lexical hedging signals, the usual formal means in business request letters, this act can be seen as a politic behaviour.

Moreover, it seems that the sender aims to avoid expressing a direct command towards the delegates, and instead choosing to address the public relation manager as a signal of showing respect. That is, this is to avoid the act of ignoring the manager. Thus, this act realizes the positive politeness strategy notice H's (interests, wants, needs)', and since this technique is normally employed by formal business letter writers, then this act can be regarded as conventionalized to this context, hence a politic behaviour.

Following to that, the clause *for each company, I also need a letter head from the company...* encompasses the use of the 1st personal singular pronoun 'I' combined with the verb 'need', where the former can show an unmitigated pattern of the use of the imperative speech act, and the latter can carry the sense of obligation towards the addressee. This force of the obligation of the proposition of this utterance could be lessened by, say, using the inclusive personal pronoun 'we' rather than its singular counterpart, where the former pattern helps the sender avoid an obligation directly imposed on the addressee. However, this case cannot be seen as a direct command just because of looking at the pronoun 'I', especially when taking the situation in which this letter is sent, that is, the sender is the one who is responsible for processing the delegates' forms, and the use of the pronoun 'I' does not necessarily mean here to perform any greater social power against the addressee. Moreover, the verb 'need' is used here as a mitigated and indirect way to express a request, as the sender manipulates the syntactic structure to implicate a proposition of an imperative speech act in the form of a declarative utterance. The sender, instead of this, might have used some more aggravated expression like 'you must/have to...', but this manipulation reflects the use of indirectness as a means of expressing politeness through carrying out the negative politeness strategy 'be conventionally indirect'. Now, since the sender aims at mitigating the imposition that might take place towards the addressee's face, this act indicates the use of the politic behaviour category.

The last utterance of the body of this letter includes an imperative speech act in *please mention the name and position in the company*, where the word 'please' expresses the sender's modesty in requesting the addressee to perform the act uttered. This is carried out to minimize the possible obligation that may be inferred by the addressee. In this case, the negative politeness strategy is performed as a FSA towards the addressee, which is in turn regarded as a politic behaviour.

CONCLUSIONS

The following are the major conclusions arrived at from strategies used by American Native and Iraqi Non-Native Speakers of English:

- Iraqi Non-Native Speakers of English are tended to use positive politeness strategies, which are more polite and tactful style of writing business letters such as 'Best regards' or accept 'our best regards' as opposed to those written by American Native Speakers, which seem less polite such as 'sincerely'.
- American Native Speakers of English are totally using different types of choices politeness strategies in English Business Letters such as 'promise & offer'; notice, attend, to H interests'; 'in-group members'; hedging; use-in-group identity markers as in 'dear all, provides, will, our, and hope' as compared to Iraqi Non-Native Speakers of English, who used positive politeness strategies such as 'give gifts to H'; Minimize Imposition'; 'Promise'; 'hope' as in 'compliments'
- Senders and receivers use different types of politeness strategies such as Face-Mitigating Acts (FMA) to reduce the possibility of damage to the face of senders and receivers of English Business Letters. These strategies are called politeness strategies.
- The positive politeness strategy 'dear sir' is most commonly used by both American Native and Iraqi Non-Native Speakers of English in all types English Business Letter writing such as (Information, Request, Promotion, Cover, and Response Letter.
- American Native Speakers have more relative power than Iraqi Non-Native Speaker in writing effective business letter.

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